

It is important to agree how the practicalities are dealt with. Examples include:

Services/Organisation/Arrangements

- Days and times of services, preparation, clearing away and refreshments
- Access to buildings and closing arrangements
- Chalices, vestments etc.
- Keys and security
- What fittings will the 'guest' church bring?

Finance

- Insurance – make sure that the property of both 'host' and 'guest' are covered
- Maintenance, including cost of heating, lighting, repairs etc.

Name of Church

- This may need consideration if a Formal Agreement is envisaged.

Consulting and making decisions together

- Regular meetings of clergy
- Access to the Church Councils by representatives of partner churches

Joint Communication

- Shared notice Boards (inside and outside)
- Shared Newsletter/Parish Magazine

Terminating the agreement

- All members of the congregations fully consulted
- Parent denominations in agreement
- County and Diocesan Ecumenical Officers involved and informed

Useful Publications

Guidelines for Catholics responding to Ecumenical Welcomes

Available from the Catholic Bishop's Conference

Under One Roof

Praying together in a Common Life

Sharers, Guests or Tenants

Sharing Agreement Act 1969

Available from CTE, 27 Tavistock Square, London WC1H 9HH

Most CEOs and DEOs have copies of these publications.

There are many reasons why Catholic congregations in England share buildings with other denominations:

1. In new housing developments where several denominations agree to build a shared church
2. In a large parish where the church may not be central, Mass may be celebrated in a church of another denomination so as to preclude long journeys
3. With declining numbers in congregations a more viable option may be to share a building with another denomination
4. When a church is under repair a congregation may invite another to use their building for a short period of time. A congregation may request the use of another building.
5. When a building needs expensive repairs, the best option may be to share with another congregation.

'Sharing our church building has been a great witness to the community. People who never come to church are talking about it as if it were something truly amazing.' *Parish Priest, Stockton*

Sharing agreements can take different forms depending on the needs of the congregations and which denomination is host or guest. It is important to consult the County Ecumenical Officer (CEO) and Denominational Ecumenical Officer (DEO). **They can assist the parish by offering advice that will help to ensure that everything goes smoothly. There should be agreed guidelines even in an informal arrangement so that all congregations are aware of what is expected of them.**

1. An Informal Arrangement –

A Catholic congregation may invite another congregation to use its church for a period of time or on a semi-permanent basis. Permission to do this must be obtained from the Bishop. (*The Search for Christian Unity p.54, Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms of Ecumenism 137*).

A Catholic congregation may celebrate Mass, celebrate baptism and marriage and hold a funeral in a building owned by another denomination by invitation and with permission of the authorities of that Church. However in respect of marriage the Catholic Marriage Rite can only be celebrated in a Church of England building if a formal Sharing Agreement is in place.

2. A Formal Agreement -

A Formal Agreement is set up under the **Sharing of Church Buildings Act 1969**. There must always be a Sharing Agreement and a Constitution. It is advisable that the Sharing Agreement and Constitution be prepared and agreed as early in the planning process as possible. Since a formal Sharing Agreement is also a Local Ecumenical Partnership, consultation over the appointment of clergy should be part of the agreement.

If a new building is planned, some denominations will release monies for the project immediately, others will require the Sharing Agreement and/or the Constitution to be in place before they are allowed to do so.

Both existing and new buildings can be vested in one or several denominations. (The Ecumenical Officers will advise and the Diocesan Solicitors will prepare the legal documents.)

‘Working together makes us more effective as evangelisers. Both communities rejoice when new members join either Church. The harvest is plentiful’.
Parish Priest, Stockton

The churches must set up a Joint Council made up of equal numbers from each denomination. The Joint Council is responsible for matters relating to the management and care of the building and the raising of capital money to be spent on major work.

A formal Sharing Agreement enables each of the partners to celebrate Liturgy according to its own rites.

Shared Buildings are of two types:

a) A new building

A shared church building may be planned to meet the needs of a large new housing development. Alternatively, if existing church buildings are in a bad state a new building may be preferable to expensive repairs.

‘It is amazing how many events and services we have together. Everything we can do together, we should try to do. We are achieving much more by sharing our energy and resources.’ *Parish Priest, Stockton*

As many denominations as possible should be involved in the planning from the beginning, to provide for the greatest flexibility of use. Consideration should be given in design and planning to the traditions and sensitivities of all partner denominations. For Catholics the provision and site of the tabernacle is important. It is advisable to get advice from the Diocesan Liturgical Commission. Other

partners have different priorities and Catholics must be aware of this. It is important to discuss and resolve these issues well in advance. (*ref. The Search for Christian Unity p 54, Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms of Ecumenism 138-140*)

‘Sharing buildings brings together very different cultures. It’s a sensitive situation that makes demands on all concerned. Gently, gently is the only way forward.’ *Parish Priest, Northumberland*

b) Sharing an existing building

It is important that this kind of sharing is approached with care and consideration. Leaving a much loved building that has many memories can be very painful (like a bereavement) and it is essential that the ‘host’ church members make the ‘guest’ congregation feel not only welcome but that they are equal partners. It is essential that all partners are seen to make some sacrifices in a spirit of generosity.

‘It is surprising how few problems we have had. Both communities are very accommodating of one another.’ *Parish Priest, Stockton*

Good Practice

Sharing a church building either on an informal or formal basis offers an opportunity for congregations to grow in fellowship, worship and unity. Congregations can get to know each other by

1. Sharing coffee between services
2. Sharing house-keeping tasks
3. Sharing fund-raising
4. Sharing social events
5. Sharing musical talents and resources
6. Laity taking responsibility for hospitality
7. Sharing prayer and study groups
8. Celebrating non-Eucharistic united services
9. Learning about one another’s tradition and patterns of worship.
10. Undertaking joint projects in mission and social action
11. Clergy sharing staff meetings and prayer times

As the congregations get to know each other joint rotas for reading, welcome, flower arranging and coffee-making could become the norm.

‘We would be sad if a change in parish boundaries meant we would no longer share this building. We enjoy doing so and would hate to leave our friends.’
Parish Priest, Swindon